

## Racial Discrimination and Denial of Justice in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys

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### *Abstract*

This study aims at an analysis of the novel *The Nickel Boys* of Colson Whitehead so as to bring out his treatment of racial abuse, physical and mental torture, deprivation of justice and education, and the isolation of the Blacks by the Whites in American society. Racism is the belief that establishes the superiority of one group of people over another. Whites assume superiority over the Blacks in America. It is deeply rooted in the American society. Even though, science and technology have developed in leaps and bounds, the ill-treatment of the coloured people by the White supremacists in American society has not stopped. Blacks in America still face discrimination, injustice and bigotry on the basis of their colour. Colson Whitehead, the eminent African American writer highlights the ugly face of racism and the injustice done to the coloured people in *The Nickel Boys*. In the novel, he depicts the sad life of the Black boys in a reform school. The White wardens show their vulgarity and cruelty towards them without considering their age. The novel is based on the true story that occurred at the Dozier reform school in Florida. The protagonist, Elwood Curtis is grabbed for the crime that he has not done. He is unfairly caught up in the criminal justice system while he is travelled in a car stolen by a Black man to attend a class. The car proves to be a stolen one and Elwood Curtis has hitchhiked it. Life in the reform school worsens day by day for Elwood Curtis. Justice is denied to him and cruelty shown to him is vicious. Unfortunately, the outside world does not know about the cruelties committed against the boys in the reform school. For the parents of the Black inmates, they are getting good values and manners; the brutality is fully hidden from them. Colson Whitehead has adeptly brought out the brutalities committed by the White Superintendent Maynard Spencer, Harper and other White officials against the Black boys. Justice is denied to the Black boys and some of them are severely beaten to death at the "White House" of the prison (the reform school). In fact, the White officials have exploited the boys in the name of reform. The deaths of the boys are turned into escapes of them. They maintain secret graveyard to bury the dead ones. The severely beaten ones

are informed as sick to the parents. Colson Whitehead has depicted vividly the injustice and cruelties committed against the Blacks by the Whites in the novel.

Key Words: Racism, Justice, Identity, Death, Cruelty, Pain, and Trauma.

### **Introduction**

Colson Whitehead, the prominent American novelist of African American descent brings out the issues of Blacks in his creative works. His important works are *The Intuitionist*, *The Underground Railroad*, and *The Nickel Boys*. He has received Pulitzer Prize for his fictional works namely, *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*. This study aims at an analysis of *The Nickel Boys* so as to bring out Colson Whitehead's treatment of racial discrimination and the denial of justice to the Blacks by the Whites. He highlights the evil of racism and the atrocities committed against the Blacks by the Whites especially in the reform school.

African American literature reflects the suppressed people's culture and tradition. The issues of slavery and the Revolutionary War have led to the development of African American writing. It has become an inevitable part of American literature. The civil rights and Black arts movements play a vital role in the growth of African American literature. Their writings have focused on the suppression of the oppressed people in the United States of America. The prominent themes of Black writings include slave narratives, racism, equality, and the contribution of African Americans to American society. In the beginning, their writings have focused upon their own pathetic condition in the United States.

Racism is the unfair treatment of people of a particular race in a society because of their colour and appearance. The supremacists treat the Blacks badly and they are excluded, harassed, humiliated and degraded. White people have the strong opinion that they are superior to the Blacks and Blacks are their slaves. Though the slavery has been abolished, the ill treatment of the Blacks by the Whites continues. Blacks are longing for equal rights and better treatment in American society. United States may be a superpower country, but when it comes to the treatment of Blacks, it still lacks. Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century and Black Lives Matter protest in the current period indicate the ugly face of racism that is in existence in American society.

*The Nickel Boys* is based on a real story that delineates the brutality of the reform school in Florida. The original name of the reform school is the Dozier School for boys in Marianna. It is mentioned as *The Nickel School for boys* in the novel. Boys who commit crimes are taken to the reform school for their betterment and good future. Unfortunately, the wardens and the staff of the reform school treat the Black boys cruelly.

Sometimes they beat them to death and close the file as they have escaped. The novel begins with the words, “Even in death the boys were in trouble” (1). The prologue talks about the real reform school where the archaeologists have found many secret graveyards and they have shared the news in the media. In New York City, the protagonist, Elwood Curtis, a boy from the Nickel School, sees this news and prepares to go to Florida to tell his story. The story begins with a reference to Black leader Martin Luther King. Elwood has received an album of Martin Luther King’s speeches and it has made him a follower of him. As a Black boy, he longs for equality and better treatment in society. He is under the care of his grandmother as his parents have left for some other place to earn money, leaving the new born to her. He reads about the longing of the daughter of Martin Luther King who wants to go to the fun town, the amusement park on the Stewart Avenue in Atlanta where the Blacks are not allowed: “Yolanda begged her parents whenever she spotted the big sign from the expressway or the commercials came on TV. Dr. King had to tell her in his low, sad rumble about the segregation system that kept colored boys and girls on the other side of the fence” (10). Colson Whitehead brings out the racial discrimination of the Blacks by the Whites obviously here. The Blacks are not treated equally to Whites. The Blacks are treated as secondary citizens of the country. Being the follower of Martin Luther King, he becomes a straight-forward man and expresses his protest against the ill treatment of the Blacks. Harriet, Elwood's grandmother, works in a restaurant and he used to go there. He spends his time in the kitchen playing with the cook and others. Later, the servants get changed. They are not as good in their conduct as the previous ones, and they take advantage of Elwood’s innocence. They make use of him. Elwood has interest in reading books and they exploit his curiosity. They conduct the dish drying contest and make an offer of copies of Encyclopedia for the winner. Elwood, being an earnest lover of learning wants to win the contest. He makes great effort in cleaning all the dishes. He has won all contests in four years. This year he is going to receive the prize for his toil in the form of Encyclopedia. He wins the contest by one plate. Len, Harold and other busboys laugh and trade glance at Elwood. Harold says: “You were made to wash dishes, slick. The kitchen laughed. Elwood returned volume Aa -Be to its box. It was a fancy reward” (14). It shows the spirit of learning of a Black boy who has worked hard to earn the prize in cleaning all dishes in the canteen.

Unfortunately, the poor Black boy is cheated by the Whites in the canteen. They exploit his labour and his curiosity in learning. They do not reward him with the assured prize. They give a book with empty pages. Elwood feels pain when he opens the volumes of the book:

At home, he cleared Hardy Boys and Tom Swifts from the green bookcase in the front room and unpacked the boxes. He paused with Ga, curious to see how the smart men at the Fisher company handled

galaxy. The pages were blank – all of them. Every volume in the first box was blank except for the one he'd seen in the kitchen. He opened the other two boxes, his face getting hot. All the books were empty. (15)

This episode clearly presents, how the poor Black boy is exploited by the Whites at the canteen. They make use of his vulnerability and interest in learning. They have made him work hard in the dish cleaning and not given the proper reward for it. Colson Whitehead has adeptly brought out the ill treatment of the Blacks by the Whites here. He has revealed the crookedness of the White supremacists.

The Black students are forced to read only the second hand books used by the Whites. Often, these books are filled with racial slurs like “Choke, Nigger! You Smell. Eat Shit” (27) and “Drop dead NIGGER” (27). Many pages of the books are torn and they cannot be used for reading. The Whites are not ready to give proper education for the Blacks. They would not like the education of the Blacks and it clearly presents the racial discrimination. Though the slavery was abolished in America, the attitude of the White supremacists has not been changed and they do not like the equal treatment of the Blacks with the Whites.

Mr. Hill, Elwood's teacher asks him to join in a college in south Tallahassee. He asks for lift from a Black man to travel in a car and reach the class. Unfortunately, the car is stolen one and the police men have arrested him along with the Black man. Without any inquiry, he is sent to the Nickel Reform School as a punishment for his mistake: “Judge ordered him to Nickel” (43). It shows the indifference of the White officials towards the Blacks. They do not enquire him, out of their own perception; they decide that he has stolen the car and sent him to Nickel. The truth is suppressed in his case and the justice is denied to him. Blacks face this kind of biased approach from the White officials and the establishment. If there was a White man in the place of Elwood, his argument would have been heard by the court and other officials. Here, he is not given any opportunity to prove his innocence. They themselves come to the conclusion that the niggers always indulge in these kinds of activities. Through this episode, Colson Whitehead explains the sad state of the coloured people in American society. They have been ill-treated, humiliated and implicated on wrong reasons. They do not receive proper legal support and care. Justice is denied to them.

When Elwood reaches the Nickel school, which is so clean and there are no gates or stone walls to prevent students from escaping. Elwood wonders how it is possible and he thinks that, “Nickel wasn't that bad” (45). The reality is not known to Elwood. Appearance is always deceptive. Likewise, the reform school by its outlook represents as a normal one for everyone's eyes. He is introduced to the White Superintendent, Maynard Spencer. The uniform given to him is worn

out. At night, Elwood hears a different roar from a machine. When he goes to take a bath the next day, he could not stand the smell: “What came from pipe smelled of rotten eggs” (53). The basic amenities are not there in the reform school. The food supplied also is not good and in bad taste. The caretakers just sell all the supplementary items to the outside restaurant or to the higher officials. The food that is given is not fit to eat. Later, he befriends Turner. He advises him not to be an eager beaver as it will be good if he does not interfere in the problems of others as it may turn against him. Elwood is shocked because their education is inadequate; the students misuse words and the teacher does not take this into account. The infrastructure and other logistics are poor. Colson Whitehead brings out the sad state of education of the Black boys. He writes:

The posters on the walls featured bespectacled owls hooting out the alphabet next to bright drawings of elementary nouns: house, cat, barn. Little-kid stuff. Worse than the secondhand textbooks at Lincoln High, all the Nickel textbooks were from before he was born, earlier editions of textbooks Elwood remembered from first grade. (57)

Through this Colson Whitehead depicts the denial of education for the Blacks by the Whites in the United States. The education for the Blacks continues to be substantially separate, inadequate and unequal. The White students have better opportunities as they received quality materials and well versed professionals to train them, but for Blacks, there is lack of books, teachers and even class rooms. The teachers are not interested to promote the standard of the inmates of the school. Later in the afternoon, Elwood witnesses that a group of people bullies a small boy Corey. He tries to pacify them and he gets beaten by the gang. The problem is taken to Spencer. At midnight, along with Spencer and houseman named Earl take the boys to the “White House” which is called as “Ice Cream Factory, because you came out with bruises every color” (64). Desmond has whispered, “it was best not to move. The strap had a notch cut into it, and it’d snag on you and slice if you were not still” (65). The beating is started for the inmates and Elwood could hear roaring sound. He could not understand from where it comes. The counting differs for each inmates and Elwood wonders, “May be they lost the count, too. May be there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why” (66). Colson Whitehead reveals the brutality of the wardens of the reform school. They do not conduct any investigation regarding the issue rather they just take away the boys who are involved in the issue. Until the wardens have fed up, the physical torture continues. When Elwood turns come, he describes the beating room: “The beating room had a bloody mattress and a naked pillow that was covered instead by the overlapping stains from all the mounts that had bit into it. Also, the gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed” (67). The cry of

pain is suppressed under the roaring sound. The command of the houseman is clear to the students. Colson Whitehead depicts vividly the vulgarity and cruelty of the White Superintendent. To hide their cries, the big fan is kept. They beat at random, with no regard for counting. The wooden strap is often called Spencer's "Black Beauty" (67). It is three feet long. This incident is based on the reality that occurred at the Dozier school in Florida. The survivor named Cooper shares his horrible experience of the White House beating. He says:

School staff got him out of bed at 2 a.m. one day and took him to the White House where he says they threw him on a bed, tied his feet and began beating him with a leather strap. The first blow lifted me a foot and a half off that bed, Cooper recalls. Cooper passed out, but a boy in the next room later told him he counted 135 lashes. (Allen, n.p)

These punishments mainly take place at midnight. They make the students frightened so that they will be obedient to them. They want to see fear in the eyes of the students. The White House is the core of the reform school. Elwood is beaten severely and is admitted to the hospital for recovery. The brutal beatings have made him bedridden for several weeks. He recovers slowly, and, along with Turner, they are allotted to do the work of community service. They learn that the supplementary materials distributed to coloured students are sold to restaurants and other high-ranking officials: "Sometimes they unloaded notebooks and pencils, sometimes medicine and bandages, but mostly it was food" (89). Every year, they used to conduct a boxing match between White inmates and Blacks. Spencer asks Griff, a coloured student, to fail in the boxing match, but out of interest, Griff wins the match. At night, they come for Griff, and they take him to "out back" from where he has not returned. It is situated past the laundry:

There were two oaks on one side of the stables with iron rings into the bark. "This is out back," Turner said. "They say once in a while take a black boy here and shackle him up to those. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up." Elwood made two fists, then caught himself. "No White boys?" "The White House, they got that integrated. This place is separate. They take you out back, they don't bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that's that, boy." (102)

This shows the cruelty committed against the Blacks by the Whites. As Griff has refused to obey the order, he is taken to out back where they beat the boys with a horse whip until they die and close their file as they have escaped. White students are excluded from this kind of punishment. Colson Whitehead delineates that justice is always denied to Blacks. Whites always make use of their strength and opportunities. Blacks are not allowed to move on in their lives and their talents are hidden by the White supremacists. Elwood is often haunted by the nightmare of beating at White House. While sleeping, he has

hallucination in which the sounds of wooden straps and the moving key of the White House. He is psychologically affected by the events there. Though the wounds are healed, he could not come out of the trauma and suffered greatly from it: “He woke after midnight, when the dormitory was dead, starting at imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling. He squinted at the darkness—nothing” (153). It reveals the trauma undergone by the Blacks caused by the brutalities of the Whites.

Colson Whitehead describes the true incident that occurred at the Dozier School. The survivors of the reform school still could not come out of those nightmares. They still panic in the darkness. The scars and the pain remind them again and again about the beatings, which pulls them back to the traumatic stage. Elwood could not tolerate the cruelties, so he handovers a letter to the inspection officer that consists of the brutalities against the Blacks in the reform school. He knows that Spencer will take him to the White House where he will be beaten to death. As he thinks, he is put into a dark cell without any ventilation and the food is given once a day. The wardens come every day and beat him as hard as they could. After some days, they plan to take Elwood out back. Turner helps him to escape, and they run away from the reform school. Unfortunately, when they are on the verge of freedom, the White superintendents come for them, and they shoot Elwood dead. Colson Whitehead makes known the miseries of the Black students at the reform school. For the students of Nickel, escape is not possible. Once the students enter for any crime in Nickel, it is almost impossible to come out of the place. They can grab the students, torture and kill them, and bury them in a secret graveyard, which is unknown to the outside world.

The school is not actually a reform school but just a prison where the Blacks are mostly exploited by the White wardens. It is the torture house of the Blacks. The masters show their oppression by their merciless beatings and vulgarity. They treat the Blacks as their slaves and worse than animals. There is always injustice for Black students. Even their mischievousness is considered a crime and their period of stay at the reform school will be increased. There is always segregation between the White students and the Blacks. Colson Whitehead brings out the ugly face of racism that is practiced in the reform school. No one bothers to listen to the truth of the other side (Black). The protagonist is sentenced for a crime which he has not committed. He is taken to the White House for having saved a small boy from being bullied, and finally, when he attempts to escape; he is shot by Mr. Harper. The Dozier school survivors still have nightmares and the trauma. Their sufferings and agony cannot be described in words. For the outside people, it is a reform school, but for the students, it is a hell from where they cannot escape. The survivors could not indulge in normal life even after their release. The darkness, nightmares, the sound of the wooden strap, the

scars on their bodies still haunts their memories. The school was closed in the year 2011, but the survivors are still suffering. Through this novel, Colson Whitehead highlights the suffering of the coloured people in American society. The exploitation they face in the name of reform school, their longing for freedom and love, and their yearning to lead a normal life are artistically unwrapped by the African American writer in the work.

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